

Who is a Palestinian?

WHO REALLY is a Palestinian? Is it someone who was born in Palestine before November 29, 1947, when the UN General Assembly voted to partition Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state? Or is it anyone who was born, and will be born to parents whose forefathers are descendants of people who lived in Palestine before 1947?

One should remember that until this very day, there never was an independent Arab Palestine. The Palestinian Arabs of Mandatory Palestine refused to accept the UN partition plan, the Arab invasion followed, and in 1949, the Armistice Agreements were signed by Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, but not by any Palestinian Arab authority. From 1949 until 1967, Judea and Samaria were occupied by Jordan, and the Gaza Strip by Egypt. The Palestinians never had possession of Arab Palestine, though the occupying Arab countries could have established such a state.

During the war in Lebanon in 1982, Yasser Arafat and other PLO leaders claimed that there were approximately six million Palestinians who demanded Palestine as their homeland. It is worthwhile to remember certain historical facts.

Just before the First World War in 1914, there were about 500,000 Arabs and about 100,000 Jews living in Palestine, west of the Jordan River.

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Thirty-three years later, in 1947, before the outbreak of the War of Independence, approximately 1.3 million Arabs and 650,000 Jews lived in British Mandatory Palestine. The Arabs had tripled their number and the Jews had increased six-and-a-half.

The growth of both the Arab and the Jewish population was not due to natural increase by birth alone, but mainly to immigration.

Whereas the Jews came mostly from pre- and postwar Europe, the Arabs moved down from the Syrian and Jordanian hills, the vast majority of them entering Palestine illegally. As a result of the British occupation of Palestine in 1917 and growing Jewish immigration, the country became a source of employment for poor and hungry Arabs from across the Jordan River.

The fact is that Palestine had become a land attracting not only Jewish immigration, but Arab immigration in even greater numbers. It would be fair to say that a very substantial part of the Arab population in Palestine in 1947 were not born Palestinians but immigrants, mostly illegal. The Palestinian claim that they lived in Palestine "from time immemorial" is therefore not

true. It would be correct to say that about half of the Arabs living in Palestine at the end of 1947 were not Palestinian-born.

ACCORDING TO UN and Israeli official sources, somewhere between 500,000 and 700,000 Arabs fled to the West Bank (Jordanian-occupied at the time), the Gaza Strip (Egyptian-occupied), Lebanon, Jordan, and, to a much lesser extent, Syria. During the same period, out of the 840,000 Jews who lived in Arab lands, 580,000 had to flee to Israel and 260,000 had to make their way to Europe and other countries abroad.

The PLO claims that the Palestinians number roughly six million. We know for a fact that out of this estimated number, about 600,000 live in Israel as Israeli citizens; 1.5 million live in Jordan and are Jordanian citizens; and another 1.5 million live in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza District. That makes altogether 3.6 million of whom 2.1 million are not Palestinians, but citizens of Israel and Jordan respectively.

It seems grossly exaggerated, to say the least, that an additional 2.4 million (to make up the claimed six million), really *do* exist, living in

Lebanon, Syria and other countries as refugees. Those living in the Americas, in Europe and elsewhere have long since become citizens of these countries, and can therefore not be counted as Palestinians.

SHOULD ONE accept the fact that Arabs who were not born in Palestine and never lived there are regarded as Palestinians, then it follows logically that descendants of Jews who fled from Arab countries should be Egyptian, Libyan, Algerian, Iraqi citizens, etc. All these could - and should - similarly lay claim to rights and property in those lands.

Considering the above, it would be correct to say that there are no Palestinians at all, but only Arabs who lived in British Mandatory Palestine. The Palestinian entity is a creation of the world media and, legally, never existed.

The Arab population in Samaria, Judea and the Gaza Strip are the only ones who can regard themselves as authentic Palestinians, though an Arab Palestine was never established. Their political future depends upon the Israeli government, and will be decided taking into account, first and foremost, the security, safety and well-being of the Jewish state.

(The writer is a retired IDF lieutenant-colonel.)